

How to Finally Get Egalitarian Prayer at the Western Wall

American Jewish groups need to broaden their Israeli coalition and work with sympathizers in the government, rather than engage in satisfying but counterproductive hard-sell tactics

By [Liel Leibovitz](#) | November 22, 2016 2:30 PM

It hasn't been an easy month for American Jews, more than two-thirds of whom voted for Hillary Clinton and many of whom are terrified by the election of Donald Trump. To the already growing list of political bad news, then, it gives me no pleasure to add one more setback: the delicate negotiations over egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall, the subject of guarded optimism earlier this year, have come to a very public impasse after a coalition of rabbis, led by the heads of the American Conservative and Reform movements, marched into the Kotel plaza on November 2 and were immediately confronted by security officials and enraged *haredi* worshipers alike.

The rabbis were there to protest the Israeli government's failure to implement its plan to dedicate an ecumenical prayer space in Judaism's holiest site. Though Israel's Supreme Court had given the government until November 17 to explain why it had yet to put its plan into motion, the rabbis felt that they had waited long enough. The protest, as the Reform movement's Rabbi Rick Jacobs later [told](#) the press, was "an act of spiritual disobedience."

Having long supported egalitarian prayers at the Kotel, I certainly sympathize with the rabbis' frustration. But as someone with much experience in the glacial pace of change in bureaucratic Israel, I worry about this choice of hard-sell tactics and how they might scuttle the much-needed progress made in recent years.

To start, even those most critical of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's delay in executing the agreement his own administration had signed are compelled to credit him for taking on this thorny issue rather than punting it to the courts or trying to stifle it altogether. Netanyahu, said Rabbi Steven Wernick, the Chief Executive Officer of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, "didn't have to do any of it. The fact that he did is significant, and he has shown tremendous and courageous leadership." And yet, Wernick continued, "we're afraid he's not going to risk the coalition over these issues," and thus Wernick and his colleagues felt compelled to take action and protest.

To some Israeli ears, this approach betrays, at best, a profound lack of understanding of Israeli political culture, an ecosystem animated by its own peculiar and often chaotic logic, or, worse, bad faith on the part of the rabbis. "There are two possible explanations for the way the leadership of the Reform and Conservative movements are handling the *Kotel* issue," said one Israeli official. "Either they are clueless about how Israeli politics work or they think they have more to gain by not having it resolved. Perhaps both."

Talks between the non-Orthodox denominations and government officials have been continuing slowly and steadily over the past few months, Israeli sources familiar with the issue said last week, and by opting for a public show of discord the rabbis have pushed both Netanyahu and his *haredi* coalition partners into very tight corners, making resolution more difficult.

That's a pity. The deal, as Rabbi Wernick correctly noted, "is in everybody's best interest," giving the Orthodox exclusive access to the *Kotel's* northern plaza and dedicating an egalitarian prayer space to the south. Most American Jews, myself included, strongly support this compromise; so does Netanyahu. But Israeli politics, as the rabbis are now learning the hard way, proceeds at its own pace, and a signed agreement is often a springboard into discussion, not its terminus. With time still on the clock before the court-imposed deadline, and with talks still ongoing in the background, the non-Orthodox denominations should reconsider their tactics. If they further alienate Netanyahu—several of the group's leaders issued uncommonly strong condemnations of the prime minister this month—they risk further deepening the chasm between Israel and the American Jewish community, a rift the Kotel deal will do a lot to heal. And Netanyahu, the rabbis may very well learn the hard way, is their best shot at resolution: any other foreseeable occupant of the Prime Minister's office is likely to be significantly more dependent on the *haredi* parties for a stable coalition than Netanyahu, who can appeal to alternative partners left and right even if the ultra-Orthodox decide to quit his cabinet.

If the egalitarian movement truly wishes to press its case forward, and if it is truly interested in more than ruffling Netanyahu's feathers in order to rally its liberal faithful back home, it should do two things right away. First, it should refrain from street theatrics and move things the only way one does in Israel—and, arguably, in politics everywhere and always—through painstaking and often flawed but ultimately successful negotiations. Second, it should build itself a broader coalition committed to religious freedom as a universal principle, regardless of particular political persuasions. One way to do that is to support the growing movement, in Israel and the United States, demanding that Jews be allowed to pray on the Temple Mount. If opening up the Kotel for ecumenical prayer is the only logical outcome of a classical liberal worldview that champions freedom of religion, it's only logical to demand the very same liberty for Jews desiring to worship at the site of the ancient temple.

Let us hope that the non-Orthodox movements reconsider their approach, broaden their appeal, and avoid further unnecessary conflict with the Israeli government. There's too much at stake here for political maneuvers to override principle.

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